

In Mike Rose's *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (1995), math and science teacher Michael Johnson makes a compelling case for using the students' own language, both speech and writing, to teach for insight.

I have students write narratives in math because it leads to deeper understanding. I'll ask them to explain to me what a decimal is. They'll say, "I'll show you." And I'll say, "No, don't show me. *Explain* to me what a decimal is, what it does. . . ." [Also] each student is linked to a buddy, and those buddies are linked to study groups. We'll take a concept—let's say reproduction in humans—and the students in the study groups cannot move on until everyone understands the concept. The students are teaching other students and are responsible for each other. You'll see a lot of talking going on. (Rose, 1995, p. 219)

Like Johnson, I believe that talk and writing can hook learners into content area instruction. Yes, some students may resort to storytelling as a default strategy on exams and high-stakes assessments because they haven't yet mastered analytic modes of thought. However, with good teaching, narrative provides a foundation for informational forms of writing, just as this chapter builds upon my fourth-grade story.

For balanced learning, students need a rich array of writing activities.

## Content Area Examples

"But wait," you may be whispering to yourself. "What would a 'rich array of writing activities' mean in *my* content area?"

Here's a small collection of ideas for expressive writing. Many use narrative, but some draw upon other kinds of thinking skills. Do you see possibilities for your own class here, or assignments you might adapt? Take a moment to browse.

### Health and Physical Education

1. Write a biographical sketch of a favorite athlete—or adopt that athlete's voice.
2. Write in letter form, explaining how to play a game or perform a particular feat to someone who doesn't know how.
3. Write to convince a friend or family member to become physically fit.
4. Keep a journal of your calorie intake, exercise regimen, or athletic training.
5. Make up new games, and write descriptions of them, giving strategies and rules.
6. Analyze and critique a gymnastics event, basketball game, or other sporting event.
7. Write self-assessments of your performance from watching video playback.
8. Compare another team's performance, style, or strategy with your own.
9. Write about a sports event on TV as a referee or umpire.
10. Analyze the social class appeals of various games in our culture.

### Consumer and Economics

1. Create recipes.
2. Write paragraphs.
3. Collect recipes and write a section of a magazine.
4. Work with others to choose proper foods.
5. Make annotations of foods from other cultures.
6. Evaluate products and those that do not.
7. Write news stories.
8. Write letters to business practices.
9. Take notes on child behavior.
10. Write and design.

### Fine Arts

1. In music, write lyrics.
2. Write assessments.
3. Write descriptions.
4. Analyze music.
5. Analyze art works.
6. Write a letter.
7. Write a critique.
8. Compile a list of different audio.
9. Explain your.
10. Write imagination.

### Mathematics

1. Explain the story.
2. Write story problems.



**Consumer and Family Studies**

1. Create recipes and write them for others after sharing cooked samples.
2. Write paragraphs deciding what should be added or omitted from the recipe.
3. Collect recipes and file them. Write short paragraphs, similar in style to the "Food" section of a newspaper, explaining the appeal of the recipes.
4. Work with others to create handbooks on good grooming, choosing a wardrobe, proper foods for good health, and so on.
5. Make annotated bibliographies for use in specific areas such as child care or preparing foods from other cultures.
6. Evaluate products and publish findings of those that do what they claim to do and those that do not.
7. Write newsletters about ideas for budget management or comparative shopping.
8. Write letters about consumer issues such as pricing, quality, or unfair or unethical business practices.
9. Take notes and write up observations in child care classes; expand these into papers on child behavior or human growth and development.
10. Write and deliver consumer announcements for radio and TV spots.

**Fine Arts**

1. In music, write lyrics that may be set to music or read with accompaniment.
2. Write assessments of performances or artifacts.
3. Write descriptions of art done by students or established artists.
4. Analyze music with regard to tone, mood, expression, or other elements.
5. Analyze art with regard to color, form, balance, or other elements.
6. Write a letter to a music/art committee describing your preferences for future events.
7. Write a critique of your own artistic performance.
8. Compile a list of music or art for a public showing; then critique the event for different audiences (PTA newsletter, school newspaper, etc.).
9. Explain your motivation for performing or creating a particular work.
10. Write imaginatively from an artist's or composer's point of view.

**Mathematics**

1. Explain the steps involved in solving a problem to someone else.
2. Write story problems like those in the text or given out as models; swap.



3. Write a description of your own strengths and weaknesses in math and offer suggestions for improvement.
4. Write about how a math skill just studied relates to the one now under study.
5. Create real-life sequences in which math is used to solve a problem.
6. Describe areas of math that you have questions about.
7. Explain math terms in your own words to someone who doesn't understand.
8. Keep a math journal of your insights and frustrations.
9. Study a numerical graph and translate its meaning into sentences.
10. Write weekly letters to parents explaining what you have learned in math.

### English and Drama

1. Create character biographies and summaries.
2. Distill and/or analyze the central message in a literary work.
3. Write from the point of view of a literary character.
4. Write up observations of actors or contrasting presentations of a work.
5. Write about sensory experiences that parallel those in literature.
6. Write book reviews that persuade a person to buy a book.
7. Create works in the same form as those under study.
8. Write diaries (from the author's point of view) about intention.
9. Compare a book version with its dramatic rendition on film.
10. Transform fiction or poetry into other literary forms.

### Science

1. Keep journals of lab experiments.
2. Write imaginative diaries related to scientific achievements.
3. Write imaginative accounts from inside organisms.
4. Explain a scientific principle to someone who is deaf.
5. Write opinion papers related to pollution, ecology, nuclear energy, or other topics.
6. Describe on paper your process of thinking about an application problem.
7. Write a letter home explaining what you learned this week.
8. Interview a scientist about his/her research and prepare a report.
9. Make predictions about the future based on present trends or data.
10. Compare alternate theoretical explanations for an event.

### Social Science

1. Write about...
2. Explain...
3. Create a...
4. Conduct...
5. Become...
6. Explain...
7. Keep a j...
8. Extrapol...
9. Create a...
10. Persuade...

### Narrative

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### Social Sciences

1. Write about a single event from different points of view.
2. Explain what two or more events have in common historically.
3. Create a “You Are There” scenario.
4. Conduct field research (interviews and polling) and write up the results.
5. Become a historical figure and create a diary.
6. Explain an event to someone from another planet.
7. Keep a journal recording news references to a particular topic.
8. Extrapolate into the future from present social trends.
9. Create a case study illustrating a psychological principle.
10. Persuade the public through a letter to the editor expressing your views.

### Narrative Insights

So let’s summarize: Narrative provides the backbone for daily writing in learning logs—the expressive work so fundamental to active learning. The previous array of prompts suggests that logs are limited only by our own imagination. It’s through them that students construct ongoing stories of what they understand. Information thus gets transformed into personal knowledge, which can be showcased eventually in exams, traditional essays, or learning portfolios.

To write for insight is to make sense to oneself, first and foremost. At the same time, writing is also a means of communicating with others in a classroom arena. Narrative writing helps students discover meanings in their own experience and connect those meanings to curriculum content through reflection; but shaping one’s story for others requires a leap of imagination—keeping readers in mind, asking what they will need from the text, and finding the right words.

Narrative is powerful because it invites students to revisit an experience and learn from it. Moreover, as students share learning stories—and as those stories are validated by others through applause, discussion, and shared laughter—a genuine classroom community is created. Marginalized learners begin to understand, for example, that they’re not the only ones who struggle with basic algebra concepts or symbolism in literature. And the well-articulated insights of key students can serve as scaffolding for the entire class, raising the intellectual bar for inquiry.

As you review the Four Writing Domains framework in the Preface, you’ll note that learning autobiographies can *either* be an expressive, writing-to-learn activity or a more formalized type of process writing task in the narrative domain. In either case, the writing will help students clarify the meanings of their experience in a particular content area such as history, science, mathematics, or music.